

Writing Great Briefing Materials

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What We Will Cover

- ▶ The Cost of Poor Writing
- ▶ Facts About Good Writing
- ▶ Facts About Good Briefing Material
- ▶ Process Matters
- ▶ Identifying the Essential Elements
- ▶ Organization of Information & Format
- ▶ Clear Paragraphs and Sentences
- ▶ Examples of Revisions
- ▶ Presenting Data Graphically
- ▶ Resources



Costs of poor writing

- ▶ Cycle time
- ▶ Agility
- ▶ Decision Quality
- ▶ Credibility
- ▶ Opportunities
- ▶ Job Satisfaction
- ▶ FTEs/\$\$
 - ▶ for reading things several times
 - ▶ for mistakes due to poor communication
 - ▶ for revisions

Cost of writing one memo:

First draft –	1 hr @ \$45 an hr	=	\$45
One review -	.3 hr@ \$60 an hr	=	\$20
Redraft -	.5 hr@ \$45 an hr	=	\$22
Clearances -	.25 hr@ \$75an hr X 2	=	\$36
Total			\$123
Total if 3 rewrites			= \$369

Example

ORIGINAL – 119 WORDS

Agencies are expected to set ambitious goals in a limited number of areas that encourage innovation and adoption of evidence-based strategies that push them to achieve significant performance improvements beyond current levels. OMB generally expects agencies to make great progress on all of their ambitious goals and achieve most of them, but at the same time will work with an agency that consistently meets a very high percentage of its ambitious goals to assure it is setting sufficiently ambitious goals. It will also work with agencies to develop performance improvement plans to support progress on the more challenging goals and objectives. Agencies are accountable for constantly striving to achieve meaningful progress and find lower-cost ways to achieve positive results.

PLAIN LANGUAGE VERSION – 79 WORDS

Agencies should achieve significant results at lower costs as they make improvements in operations. They will set a limited number of ambitious goals with targets well beyond current levels. Ambitious goals encourage innovation and strategies based on in-depth analysis. Agencies are expected to achieve most of their goals. But, if all targets are always met, OMB will assess if goals are ambitious. When agencies are not meeting challenging targets, OMB will work with them to develop performance improvement plans.



Facts about good writing

- ▶ It looks easy.
- ▶ It's not easy.
- ▶ It takes a lot of time (three drafts minimum).
- ▶ Rework and miscommunication take much more time.



Facts About Good Briefing Material

- ▶ Objectives and audience are clear
 - ▶ Inform
 - ▶ “Frame” a decision
 - ▶ Present a position and alternatives for a decision
 - ▶ Provide an action plan & rationale
- ▶ Simplifies the complicated
- ▶ Provides all the important relevant information
 - ▶ Including and especially bad news
 - ▶ Adds analytic value
- ▶ Easy to read
 - ▶ Good organization
 - ▶ Good writing
- ▶ Brief (one to three pages)
 - ▶ TLDR = “Too Long, Didn’t Read”



Organization

- ▶ Answer the following questions in the first few lines:
 - ▶ What is this paper about?
 - ▶ What is the basic background?
- ▶ Anticipate and answer questions an intelligent reader is likely to ask.
- ▶ Use headings
 - ▶ Allow the reader to quickly find information.
 - ▶ Increase white space on the page (looks more “approachable”)
 - ▶ Question Headings help readers relate to the information
- ▶ Use lists and tables to simplify complex material



Example: Proposal to Create a “Green Store”

▶ Purpose:

- ▶ Present the case for creating a central repository for surplus office supplies;
- ▶ Receive authorization to establish this “green store.”

▶ Background:

- ▶ Survey showed that usable supplies are being discarded
- ▶ Executive Order directs savings and conservation
- ▶ Review of space showed xx sq ft for storing supplies

▶ Proposal:

- ▶ Description –
- ▶ Cost –
- ▶ Savings –
- ▶ Risks and Mitigation -

▶ Action Plan if Approved:



Example: e-mail announcement

This is to let you know that the Agency Priority Goal proposals have been approved by the Executive Office of the President.

The new Agency Priority Goals are:

Please make sure all your employees know what the DOC Agency Priority Goals are, and that progress will be updated quarterly on www.Performance.gov. The information on the site will help everyone appreciate the importance of our work.



Process Matters

- ▶ Collaborate early or re-write (several times) later
 - ▶ Pre-draft conference call
 - ▶ Outline review
- ▶ Collaborate with who?
 - ▶ Who will have to “clear” on the paper?
 - ▶ Who is the expert on the subject?
 - ▶ Who has strong opinions on the subject?
 - ▶ Who are the primary stakeholders?
 - ▶ Should other agencies be involved?
- ▶ What facts will help the process?
 - ▶ On what points will there be disagreement?
 - ▶ What research will help resolve issues?
 - ▶ Facts
 - ▶ Comparisons and Benchmarks



Identifying the Essential Elements

- ▶ Step one: “The Brain Dump”
 - ▶ In no order at all list facts, observations, data that the audience should know.
 - ▶ Can be done with collaborators or after a pre-draft meeting
 - ▶ Put your notes in affinity groups.
- ▶ Step two: “Explain it to a friend.”
 - ▶ Build a first cut outline from your explanation
 - ▶ Get input on the outline
- ▶ Step three: “Identify fact gaps.”
- ▶ Step four: “Research the gaps.”
- ▶ Step five: Write, re-write, refine



Clear Sentences

Keep them short!

- ▶ Sentences

- ▶ Express only one idea in each sentence
- ▶ Keep the subject, verb, and object close together
- ▶ Avoid double negatives and exceptions to exceptions
- ▶ Place words carefully



Example of Revisions

Before

After notification of NMFS, this final rule requires all CA/OR DGN vessel operators to have attended one Skipper Education Workshop after all workshops have been convened by NMFS in September 1997. CA/OR DGN vessel operators are required to attend Skipper Education Workshops at annual intervals thereafter, unless that requirement is waived by NMFS. NMFS will provide sufficient advance notice to vessel operators by mail prior to convening workshops.

After

Vessel operators must attend a skipper education workshop before they begin fishing each fishing season. They will receive a reminder notice from the National Marine Fisheries Service.



Clear Paragraphs

- ▶ Use the “Because” approach

Commerce is an interesting and rewarding place to work. Research conducted by Commerce employees is at the cutting edge of technology. NOAA is developing state of the art weather forecasting models. NIST is developing nano-technology. Commerce agencies save lives during extreme weather events. ITA, MBDA and EDA help save livelihoods by providing technical assistance to businesses and communities.



Presenting Data Graphically

- ▶ Does the title clearly state what is being presented?
- ▶ Are axes clearly labeled?
- ▶ Is a legend provided and clear?
- ▶ Is there too much data?
- ▶ Is the right scale used?
- ▶ Does the image tell the story that needs telling?



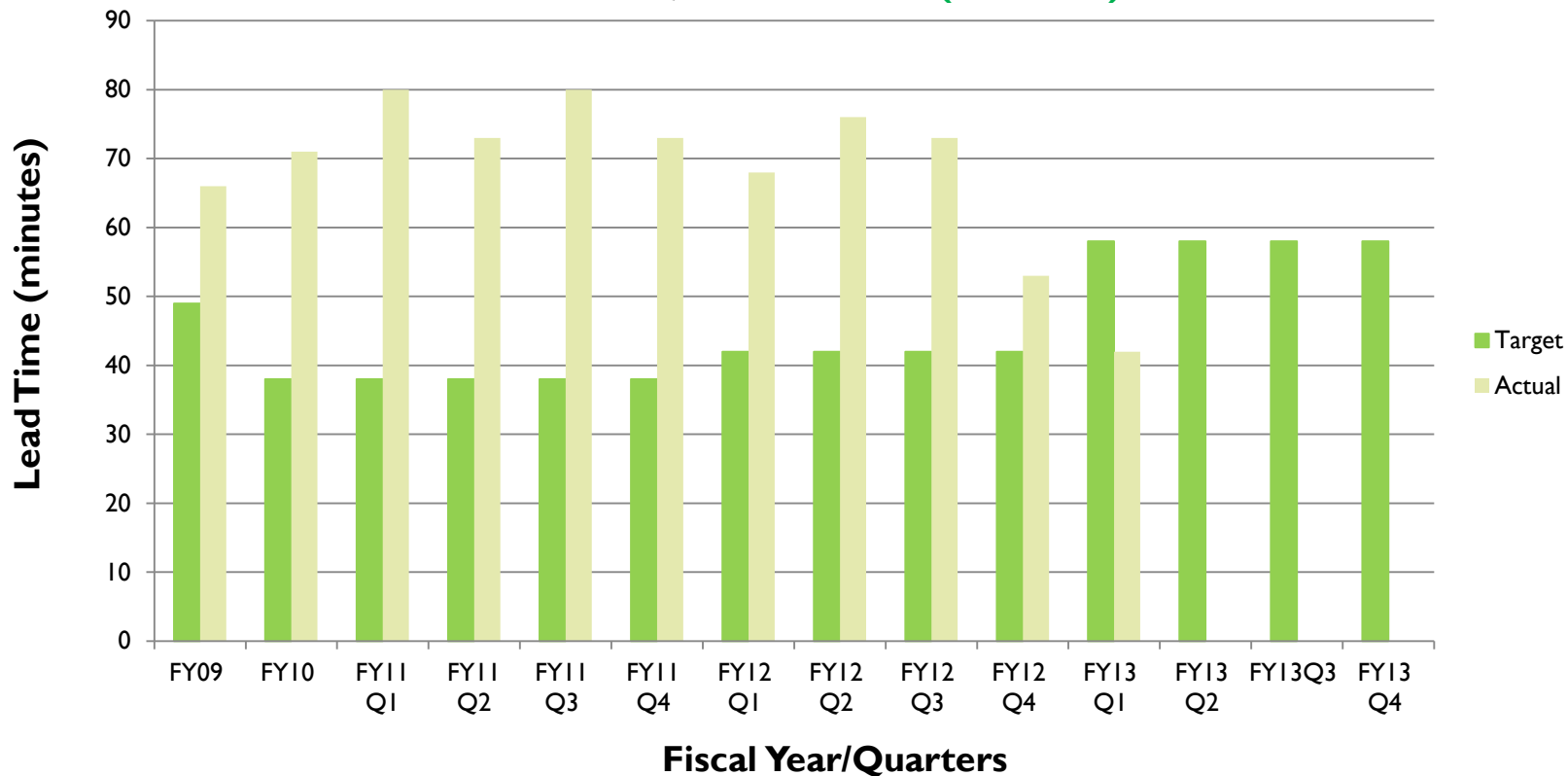
Suggest Improvements

Severe Weather Warnings for Flash Floods-Lead Time (minutes)

****Priority Goal****

FY13 Q1 Target: 58

FY13 Q1 Actual: 42* (not met)



*The FY 2013 Q1 data only includes October. 42 minutes is preliminary and will be updated with data for November and December

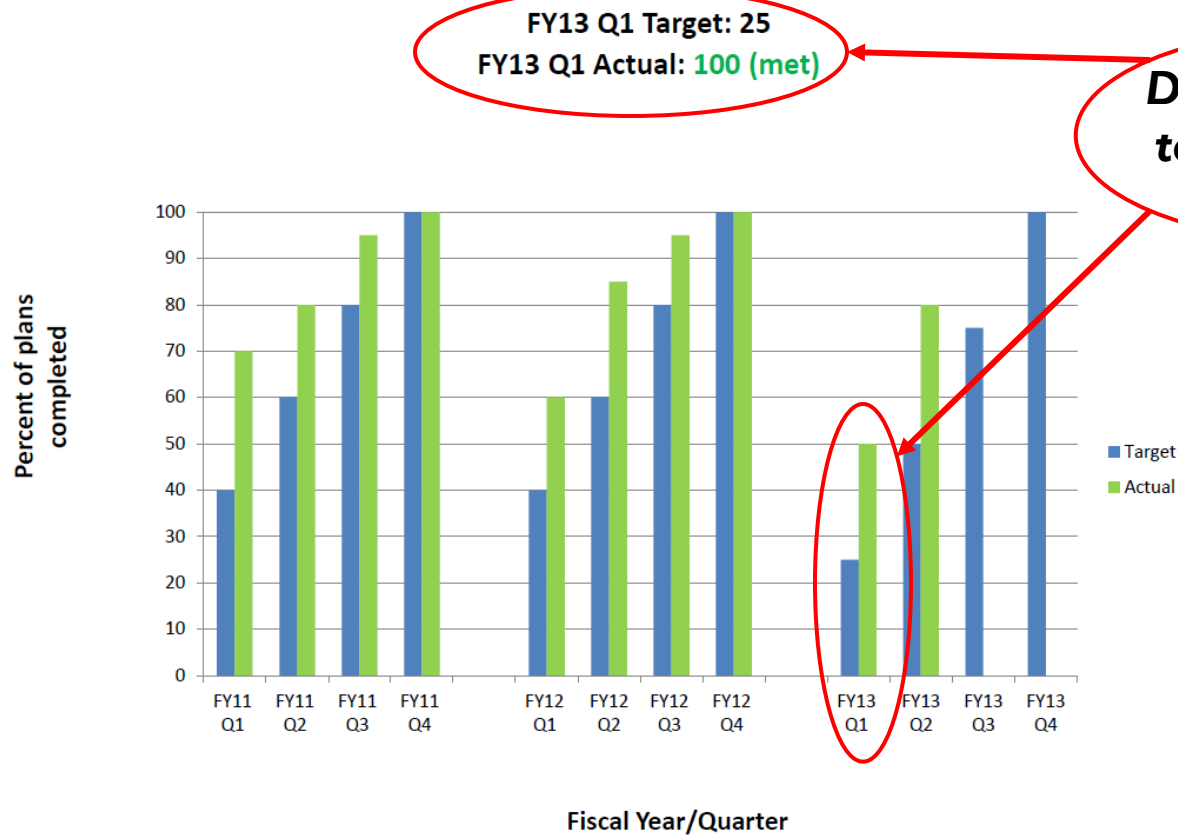
** In FY 2010 measurement transitioned from a county based warning paradigm to an events based paradigm



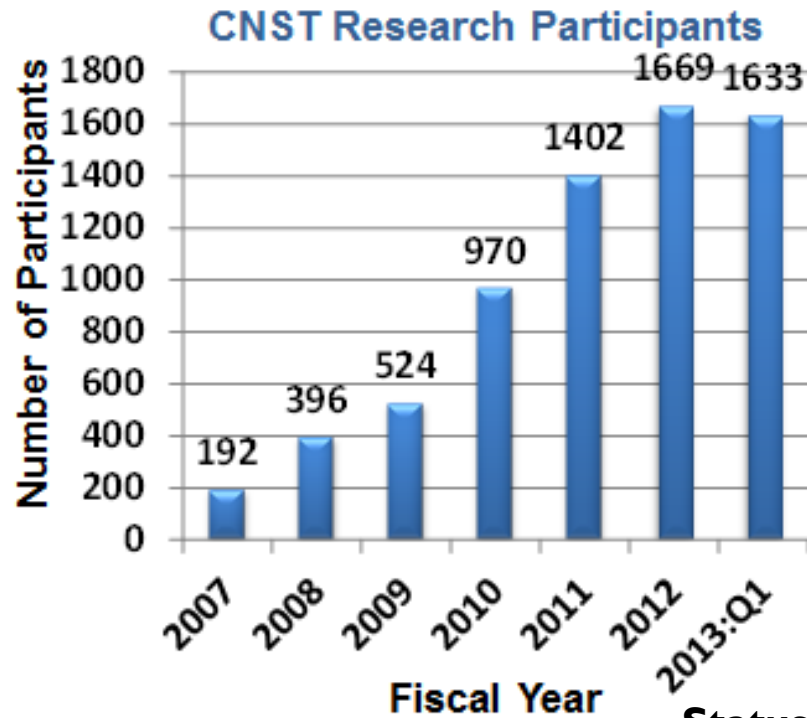
Examples

Organizational Excellence

Percent Corrective Actions Plans completed (A-123s)



Examples



Is there enough context here to understand the importance of the decrease? What about targets?

Status & Significant Developments

- CNST Research Participants in FY12 increased 19 % and came from a record number of institutions (363)
- Research Participants in FY12 from industry increased 39 %
- The number of NanoFab projects grew by 42 % in FY12
- Project growth continued in FY13 Q1, but Research Participants decreased because a few large projects ended

Examples

Targets:

- 100% of systems with valid Authority to Operate
- 100% of Plan of Action and Milestones (POA&Ms) closed on time

Status and Significant Developments:

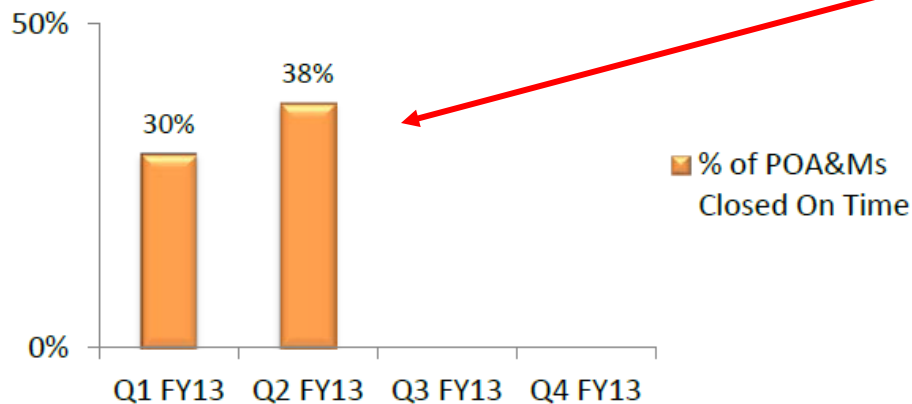
449 total POA&Ms Open at the beginning of the quarter

111 systems with valid ATO / 111 total # of systems = 100% with valid ATO

of total POA&Ms open at the beginning of each quarter:

Q1 FY13	Q2 FY13	Q3 FY13	Q4 FY13

% of Plan of Action & Milestones (POA&MS) Closed On-Time



Graphic does not communicate that these percentages are far from 100% closed on time target.

Examples

Performance Measures:

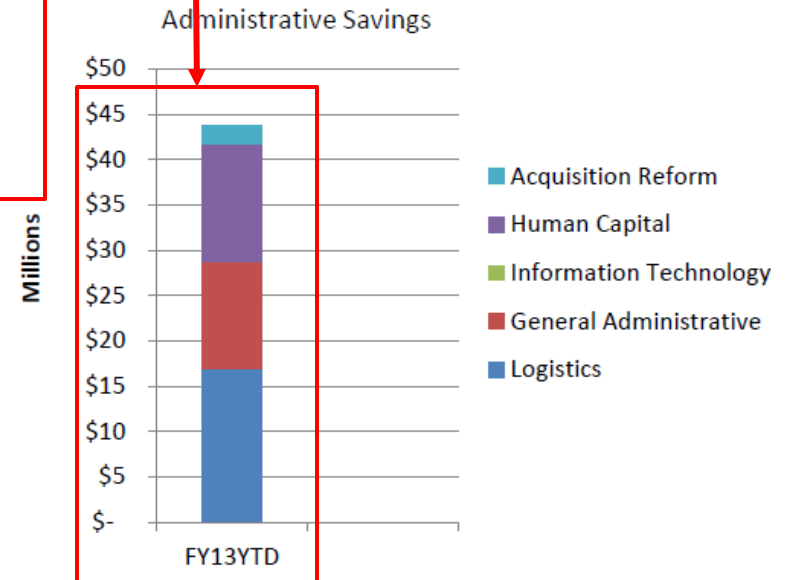
- Administrative Savings (FY13 Target = \$15.7M)

Status & Significant Developments:

- FY13 Guidance was received after Q1, however, reporting on Q1 and Q2 combined below:

- FY13 Q1-Q2 administrative savings were validated at \$45.1M
- The savings category for FY13 are:
 - Logistics: \$16.9M
 - Acquisition Reform: \$2M
 - General Administrative: \$11.7M
 - Human Capital: \$13M
 - Information Technology: \$0M

How does this all correlate? Can you tell?



Crowd Editing for Practice

- ▶ 03 The Circular requires the Secretary of Commerce to:
 - ▶ Coordinate and foster executive branch implementation of the policy set forth in paragraph 6 of the Circular (see paragraph .04 of this Section), and provide, at the Secretary's discretion, administrative guidance to assist agencies in implementing paragraph 8.b.(5) of the Circular, which states that the heads of agencies concerned with standards will "consult with the Secretary, as necessary, in the development and issuance of, internal agency procedures and guidance implementing this Circular, and submit, in response to the request of the Secretary, summary reports on the status of agency interaction with voluntary standards bodies
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Edited Version

- ▶ 03 The Circular requires the Secretary of Commerce to:
- ▶ Lead executive branch implementation of paragraph 6 of the Circular . The Secretary may also provide guidance to agencies on paragraph 8.b.(5). It states that agencies will consult with the Secretary on related internal procedures. Upon request, they must provide summary reports on work with voluntary standards bodies.



Summary

- ▶ If you remember nothing else:
 - ▶ Write shorter sentences (no more than two lines).
 - ▶ Edit out unnecessary words.
 - ▶ Make revisions, if you would never say it that way.
 - ▶ Label charts and graphs carefully.



Resources

www.Plainlanguage.gov

The Art of Critical Decision Making

Professor Michael A Roberto

www.thegreatcourses.com

Thinking Fast & Slow

Daniel Kahneman

